

THE USE OF WRITING

IN ANCIENT INDIA

BY

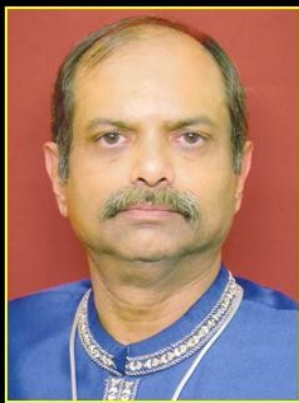
PANDIT SHYAMAJI KRISHNAVARMMA

COMPILED BY

HEMANTKUMAR GAJANAN PADHYA







Usha PRAKASHAN



**USHA PRAKASHAN
UNITED KINGDOM**

sacredswastika@aol.com

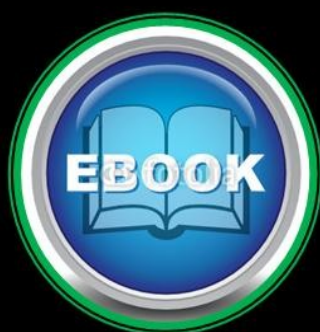
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प्रथम आवृत्ति

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PREFACE

Pandit Shyamaji Krishnavarama was a great Sanskrit scholar and a cardinal disciple of the great Vedic teacher Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj. Shyamaji had made his name and fame at University of Oxford in England. He worked as an assistant to The Boden Professor of Sanskrit , Sir Monier Monier-Williams and contributed immense service to the Sanskrit department and formation of Indian Institute at Oxford. Pandit Shyamaji was internationally recognised as the most proficient speaker in Sanskrit language and he was highly respected by many western orientalists like Mr Max Muller. Pandit Shyamaji attended many international conferences of Orientalists representing India on recommendation of The Secretary of State of India. He presented and read several papers of his research at the conferences and lectured in fluent Sanskrit.

Pandit Shyamaji wrote one of his research papers on subject of "The Use of Writing in ancient India" to counter attack the arguments of many oriental scholar that the art of writing was borrowed by the Hindus or Aryans from Semitic sources. Pandit Shyamaji Pandit strongly contested the theory brought forward by the western orientalists and challenged their arguments. Shyamaji brilliantly and scholarly argued his case and persuaded the doubting and endorsing western orientalists pointing out at their misunderstanding with proof.

Many work of Pandit Shyamaji is lost with the space of time as he did not have any siblings. We deemed our humble duty to preserve this brilliantly presented research paper for future generation of students, serious readers and scholars in the form of an e-booklet for educational purpose as a part of our campaign to preserve promote and propagate the memories and work of Pandit Shyamaji Krishnavarma. We hope that the admirer and lovers of Pandit Shyamaji work will definitely welcome our sincere efforts in that direction.

: Mr Hemantkumar Gajanan Padhya
Hindu Swatantryavir Smruti Sansthanam
United Kingdom



THE USE OF WRITING IN ANCIENT INDIA

A paper which purports to discuss the question of the employment of Writing in ancient India is always likely to excite the interest of Oriental scholars in Europe, and not the less so when the Writer is a native of India and approaches the subject from an Indian point of view.

Let me begin by remarking that those who advocate the theory that Writing was unknown in ancient India will have to account in some satisfactory manner for the unaided production of an immense literature of vast antiquity, a literature more extensive than the ancient literature of Greece and Rome combined. It is said that the natives of India though unaided by Writing, were aided by the gift of a most powerful and retentive memory, but in real fact too much credit is given to us for this mental faculty. Certainly We do not possess it to such an extraordinary degree as to produce or to learn by heart literary works on all sorts of subjects Without resorting to artificial assistance.

And now before stating my own views on the subject, I wish to say that it is not my intention to raise a discussion on the difficult question about the origin of Indian writing, though I may remark in passing that We in India differ altogether from those Oriental scholars who maintain that the art of writing was borrowed by the Hindus from semitic sources, holding on the contrary, as we do, that it originated independently on Indian soil. Nor will it be possible for me Within the limits of a short paper to produce elaborate evidence of the use of Written characters in ancient India. All I shall endeavour to do on the present occasion is first to meet certain objections that have been raised by European scholars against the theory that the art of Writing was well known and generally practised before the beginning of the Christian era; secondly to point out that there are words and phrases in the ancient literature of India which prove the existence of written characters in the earliest times; and thirdly to show that literary works like the Ashtadhyayi of Panini could never have been composed without the help of Writing.

The first objection raised against the knowledge of written characters in ancient India is that "the etymological meaning of the word Shruti" as designating the Vedas and the brahmanas, and the fact that numerous Sakhas of the Vedas have disappeared altogether, as well as the very existence of several recensions at the present day support the theory of the absence of writing in early times. It is argued that from time immemorial the Vedas and their accompaniments have been communicated by the teacher to his pupil orally and that the latter regards it as his, sacred duty not to study his scriptures in any other Way Whatever - a practice Which accounts for the many recensions of the Vedas.

Others object that the silly denunciations of writing in which the Brahmans have always indulged, render it excessively improbable that they had anything to do with the introduction of the art,¹⁾ and they seem to support this theory by comparing, as it were, the learned class of India with the fox in Aesop's Fable, who being quite unable to reach the delicious ripe grapes said at last, "They are sour."

Others again object that the art of writing could not have been known in ancient India, because there is no mention of books, pens, ink, writing, or like matters, in any Sanskrit work of genuine antiquity, ²⁾ and because the style of some of the Sanskrit works and particularly of those known as Sutra works, which are composed, it is said, in the most artificial, elaborate and enigmatical form and in which shortness is the real object the author has in view, ³⁾ does not favour the theory which claims for ancient India the use of written characters; and in support of this statement about the apparent brevity of the Sutra works they quote a Paribhasha, the meaning of which is that, Grammarians rejoice in the economizing of half a short vowel as much as in the birth of a son "⁴⁾.

Now in reply to such objections I contend that those who hold that the word Sruti as a synonym of the Veda always conveyed the idea of what was learnt and taught by hearing, thus proving the absence of written books. I, in my humble opinion, under a serious mistake regarding the true signification of this term; for they seem to forget that the argument about the etymological meaning will equally apply to the word "Smriti" which is usually translated by tradition, but which, as we all know, is derived from the root "Smri" to remember, just as the word "Sruti" comes from "Sru," to hear. Now it cannot be said that the art of writing was not known to the authors of the Smritis, since we find allusions frequently made to documentary evidence by Manu ⁵⁾, Yajnavalkya, Vishnu, Narada and others. But I believe the words "Sruti and Smriti" have nothing to do either directly or indirectly with the question of writing.

As to the argument about the disappearance of many Saakhaas of the Vedas and about the existence of several recensions at the present day, one may safely say that it is not valid. It cannot be doubted that from the beginning of the Smriti period up to the present time Writing has been in common use in India, and yet to our

1) Vide Dr. Burnell's Elements of South-Indian Palaeography. p. 3.

2) Vide Professor Max Müller's Ancient Sanskrit Literature p. 512.

3) Ancient Sanskrit Literature p. 71.

4) अर्धमात्रालाघवेन पुत्रोत्साहं मन्यन्ते वैयाकरणं Vid. Paribhasllendiiéekhara, paribhé. 122.

5) Vide Menu VIII. 168. बलाद् दत्तं बलाद् भुक्तं बलाद् यच्चापि लेखितम् । सर्वान् बलकृतानर्थानकृतान् मनुर्ब्रवीत् ॥ Vide also Yjnavalkya. II. 240. Vishnu. III. 81.

great sorrow We find that several Smritis, Puraanas, Kaavyas and Works on almost every branch of learning exist no longer; that they did exist at one time is not difficult to prove, since they are quoted by later Writers who must have known at least portions of them. Patanjali, for instance, gives a list of the Sanskrit works With which he himself was most conversant 1). He mentions among others the four Vedas with their Angas and Bahasyas and their various recensions, viz, one hundred Saakhaas of the Yajurveda which he calls Adhvaryu, one thousand Saakhaas of the Samaveda, twenty-one Saakhaas of the Rigveda called by him Bahvricya, nine Saakhaas of the Atharvaveda, as Well as the Vakovaakya Which according to Kaiyata Was Written in the form of a dialogue. He also mentions Itihaasa, Purana, and Vaidyaka or science of medicine, though he does not specify any works under these heads. In addition to these, he quotes the Sangraha, perhaps encyclopaedia, of which Nagesa says Vyadi Was the author and which consisted of one hundred thousand Slokas. Though it is admitted on all hands that ever since the time of Patanjali the art of Writing has been known and practised in all parts of India, still with exception of the four Vedas and a few of their recensions together with the six Angas of the Vedas, most of the Works mentioned by the author of the Mahaabhaashya are to us for all intents and purposes a thing of the past.

With regard to the existence of various Saakhaas with various recensions of several hymns, there is no justification for giving precedence to one Saakhaa over the other, since every one of them claims to be the original revelation from the very beginning of its compilation, and therefore the argument about the various recensions of the Vedas is not sound, particularly as there is no lack of evidence to show that not a few of the Works written in modern times abound in different readings frequently too difficult to reconcile with one another.

Now We have to consider the so called silly denunciations of Writing which are met with in some Sanskrit Works; and here I am quite willing to grant that our ancient forefathers had a predilection for oral instruction Which they encouraged by every means in their power; but the reason for this predilection is not far to seek; for though there may be difference of opinion about its utility in Europe, we in India firmly believe even at the present day that oral instruction is far superior to book learning both in maturing the mind and in developing the powers; and it must be borne in mind that this partiality for oral instruction reigns predominant amongst us, although the art of Writing has been universally practised for ages past. I Wonder if any European scholar would pride himself on being called a "book-worm"

1)सप्तद्वीपा वसुमती त्रयो लोकाश्चत्वारो वेदाः साङ्गं सहस्रस्य बहुधा विभिन्ना एकशतमध्वर्युशाखाः सहस्रवर्त्मा सामवेद एकविंशतिधाबाहुच्यं नवधाथर्वणो वेदो वाकोवाक्यमितिहासः पुराणां वैद्यकिमित्येतावाजशब्दस्यप्रयोगविषयः । Vide Patanjali's Mahaabhaasya I. 11.

for my own part. I should regard it as by no means a complimentary term. It requires no telling that a living library is better than a dead one in every respect, particularly in the study of the scriptures to Which our ancestors attached so much importance and which ought to be guided, they thought, by a duly initiated and well-informed Guru or preceptor. It is generally believed in India that book learning makes a man stupid and deprives him of all power of discrimination even in ordinary matters. I dare say some of you have heard the amusing story about the student who was asked by his teacher to copy out a manuscript. The young man made the copy correctly enough, but seeing that the original manuscript contained a dead fly which by some accident had been pressed flat between the pages he rushed about the room, caught a fly, killed it, and ultimately stuck it on to the corresponding page of his own copy. Then feeling that he had done his Work honestly, he with a cheerful face Went to his teacher and handed over the copy with the unfortunate fly and all. "Whence this mutilated fly" exclaimed the teacher. "Why" replied the young man sharply "this is simply a fly for a fly" (मत्क्षिकामप्रति मत्क्षिका). We know that people sometimes commit most frightful mistakes when dealing with manuscripts. Not long ago an eminent Orientalist told me What had happened to a scholar who was studying Sanskrit from a manuscript. Though it may sound incredible, the young man actually learnt (मूत्रयति आचार्यः instead of सूत्रयत्याचार्यः Such dreadful mistakes can never occur in oral instruction. it frequently happens that Words and phrases seem simple enough when taught orally, but when found in a manuscript they present considerable difficulty to a student. I myself know of a. case in Which an intelligent young man got extremely confused over the meaning of the words "वस्तुतस्तु" "वस्तु" said he is correct enough being nominative singular of वस्तु a thing, but What is the meaning of तस्तु? The poor fellow hunted up every grammar and dictionary he could lay hand on, but to no purpose. Finding no such Word as तस्तु in the Whole range of Sanskrit literature he at last came to the conclusion that there was something wrong with the manuscript; so he betook himself to his teacher, a slight hint from Whom made the young man perceive at once that the actual Words were वस्तुतः ablative of वस्तु with तस् and the particle तु the literal meaning of this same वस्तुतस्तु being,,but in reality. That even a trifling mistake in accent leads to most disastrous consequences is well illustrated in the Mahaabhaashya. Patañjali advocates the study of Sanskrit grammar very earnestly and gives many reasons why a thorough knowledge of this particular subject is necessary. Among other things he says that grammar should be studied

in order that we may not use incorrect Words and he supports his argument by quoting a couplet which says that a word may be wrong either in orthography or in accent and that, if incorrectly employed, it does not convey the desired sense, nay it assumes the form of a thunderbolt and kills the employer himself just like the ईन्द्रशत्रुः (in the hymn) by an error of accent 1).

There are enumerated in the Sikshaa 2) six Pathakadhamas or condemned students and to be sure We find that the लिखितपाठक that is to say a person who studies from books is one of them. Perhaps it may be that the author of that couplet in the Sikshaa foresaw the danger which might befall a young student from the indiscriminate use of Writing. if a monkey had a sword put into his hand, perhaps the first thing he would do would be to cut his own throat with it; and in the same way a young and inexperienced student might do harm to himself by deriving erroneous information from Written Works. Though the Vedas are held in the highest esteem by all the Hindu sects and sectarians throughout India, still their study is altogether discouraged among the masses for some reason or other, and I am inclined to think that the same remark equally applies to the art of Writing. Though We cannot always succeed in analyzing motives, still it is not difficult to see what induced the sacerdotal class in India to condemn the employment of writing so far it concerned their sacred texts. There is a saying that the best label for luggage is to carry it yourself, and the best way to preserve one's sacred books against all accidents is to carry them about with oneself in oneself in one's own mind. I believe that there will not be found a single passage in any modern or ancient Sanskrit Work condemning the use of Writing for ordinary purposes of life. On the contrary we know that Yajñvalkyā and some other lawgivers look with favour upon Written documents when produced as evi-deuce 3). It will be seen from What I have previously said that the wholesale condemnation of Writing cannot be supported by facts.

We have now to answer the last and most important argument against the knowledge of writing in ancient India. is there really nothing to be found in ancient Sanskrit literature to show that the art of writing was known in early times? I feel no hesitation in saying that there are Words and phrases occurring in the Samhitaas of the "Vedas, in the Brahmaanas and in the Sutra-works which leave no doubt as to the use of written characters in ancient India. It may be confidently asserted that the systematic treatises in prose which abounded at and long before the time of Panini could; never have been composed without the help of Writing. We know for certain.

- 1) दुष्टःशब्दस्स्वरतो नणीवा। मिथ्याप्रयुक्तो न तमर्थमाह ॥ सवाग्वज्रमानं हिमस्ति । यथेन्द्रशत्रुः स्वरतोऽपराधात् ॥t Patanjali's Mahaabhaashya. I. 1. 1.
- 2) गीती शीघ्री शरःकम्पी तथा लिखितपाठकः । अनर्थज्ञोऽल्पकपठश्च षडेते पाठकाधमाः ॥ Shikshaisioka. 32.
- 3) प्रमाणंलिखितं भुक्तिः सात्विजाश्चेतिकीर्तितम् । एषामन्यतमाभावे दिव्यान्यत्मुमुच्यते ॥
Vide Yajñavalkya Smriti. 22. Vide also Vijnānārshvara's Commentary on this same slok.

that with the exception of the hymns of the Rigveda most of the Vaidik Works are in prose and it is difficult to understand how they could have been possibly composed without having recourse to some artificial means.

And here I Will briefly adduce some evidence in support of what I think to be the real origin of the Sutra literature. It is true that the Sutra works and notably the "Ashtadhyayi" of Panini are composed in the most artificial, elaborate and enigmatical form — a fact which to my mind is strongly suggestive of the employment of writing for their creation; but it is not altogether true that shortness is the great object of this style of composition. Agreeing with the late learned Professor Goldstucker in his conclusion that writing was known to the authors of the Sutras, I am unable to accept some of the arguments by which he arrives at it. He holds 1) that it is the awkwardness, the fragility, and in some parts of India perhaps the scarcity of proper natural leaves, which imposed upon an author the happy restraint of "economizing half a short vowel." Now the so called Paribhasha which tells us that the economizing of half a short vowel gives as much pleasure to an author as the birth of a son is not found in the Mahaabhaashya of Patanjali and therefore we must call it spurious. It can be easily shown that Panini made no difference whether the words he used were short or long 2) ; for instance, we find that he frequently uses the words विभाषा and श्रुत्यस्याम् in the sense of optionally instead of 'वा' which, as we see, is by far the shortest. What is then the true explanation of the origin of the Sutra or aphorism style of composition? This question is, I believe, satisfactorily answered by Bacon in his Advancement of Learning 3).

"But writing in aphorisms says the great English inductive Philosopher, "hath many excellent virtues, whereto the writing in method doth not approach. For first, it trieth the writer whether he be superficial or solid; for aphorisms, except they should be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of examples are cut off: discourse of connexion and order is cut off. So there remaineth nothing to fill the aphorism but some goodly quantity of observation: and therefore no man can suffice. nor in reason Will attempt, to Write aphorisms, but he that is sound and grounded. But in methods, Tantum series juncturaque pollet, *Tantum de medio sumptis accedit honoris*, as a man shall make a great show of an art, which if disjointed, would come to little. Secondly, methods are more fit to win consent or belief, but less fit to point to action; for they carry a kind of demonstration in orb or circle one part illuminating another, and therefore satisfy. But particulars do best agree with dispersed directions. And lastly, aphorisms representing a knowledge broken do invite men to inquire further: whereas methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at furthest."

1) Goldstucker on Panini p. 25—26.

2) पर्यायशब्दानां लाघवगैरवचर्चानाद्वियते । Vide Parobhaashendu-sekhara, Paribhaasha

3) Bacon's: Advancement of Learning XII. 5 p. 172.

Every Word in the passage I have just quoted from Bacon literally applies to the Ashtadhyayi of Panini who has given us, perhaps, the best specimen of the Sutra or aphorism style of composition that can be reasonably expected from any human being.

I am now going to point out certain Words and phrases which prove the employment of Writing in the earliest times. There is a hymn in the tenth Mandala of the Rigveda 1) a verse from which is quoted by both Yaska and Patanjali. The first half of the mantra in question gives the characteristics of an illiterate or ignorant person in the following Words: — “Some one seeing the speech does not see it, While another hearing does not hear it” etc. Now What does this antithesis mean? Here seeing the speech is contrasted with hearing the speech. But how can one see the speech, unless it assumes some tangible shape like that of a book or manuscript? An illiterate person, though seeing the speech in the form of a Volume, does not see it owing to his ignorance of the art of reading. This I believe to be a legitimate inference which is very much strengthened by the marked antithesis in the text. We in India think that it is not possible to learn Ganita or the science of mathematics without a previous acquaintance with the art of Writing in some form or other; for otherwise how can one possibly count a million, not to mention a billion? We all know that in ancient times when the Greeks had no knowledge of Writing, 10000 was the highest number that could be technically expressed, while the Romans had to remain contented with their “mille,” the technical term for a thousand, and we have Pliny’s authority for saying that among the ancients there was no number of a higher denomination than one hundred thousand’s 2), and even this could only be expressed by two distinct Words like “centum” and “millia” joined together. But, when We turn to the ancient literature of India, we find a different state of things. There is an important hymn in the seventeenth Chapter of the White Yajurveda 3), which contains technical names for not only a thousand and a hundred thousand but also for a million and a hundred millions, nay, for a hundred thousand billions. It is stated in the tenth Kaanda of the Satapatha-Brahmana that there are as many double Panktis in the three Vedas as there are muhurtas in a year 4); now there are thirty Muhurtas in a day and we count three hundred and sixty days in a year and therefore a year consists of 10800 Muhurtas altogether, which number exactly corresponds with the number of the double Panktis in the Three Vedas,. the number of “Aksharas” or syllables in a single Pankti being forty. Now this sort of calculation is only possible with a manuscript; particularly, as it is well known that in India We invariably associate the reckoning by Slokas with a Written book or document.

1) उत त्वः पश्यन् न ददर्श वाचमुत त्वः श्रुपवन् न श्रुणोत्येनाम् । उतो त्वस्मै तन्वविसस्त्रे ज्ञायेव पत्य उशती सुवासा ॥ ऋग्वेद X.71-4.

2) “Non reat apud antiquos numeros ultra centum millia; itaque et hodie multiplicantur haec, ut decies centra millia aut saepius dicantur” Pliny..

3) इमामेङ्गाग्नइष्टकामधेनवः सन्त्वेका च दश च शतं च शतं च सहस्रं च सहस्रं च । चायुतं चायुतं च नियुतं च नियुतं च प्रयुतं चार्बुदं च न्यर्बुदं च समुद्रश्च मध्यं चान्तश्च परार्धश्चैता मेङ् अग्नइष्टकामधेनवः सन्त्वमुत्रामुष्मिल्लोके ॥ Shikla Yajurved Vaajas, SaMhitaa XVII-2 . 4) Satapatha-Brahmana X 4. 2-21. P. 786

The two Words “Kaanda and Patala” which occur in the Vaidik literature in the sense of a division of a literary work leave little doubt as to the existence of Written books in ancient times. We know that the Taittiriya-Samhita, the Satapatha-Brahmana and some other Works are divided into Kaandas the original meaning of which term is the “stall or skin of a tree.” Even those Who deny ancient India the knowledge of writing are agreed that the Word “Patala” is almost synonymous with “,liber” and BIBAOG 1), but they declare at the same time that this is a Word never used for the subdivisions of the Brahmanas, though several of the Sutras are divided into chapters called Patalas. But we find this very word Patala used in the first Panchikaa of the Aitareya Brahmana 2) in exactly the sense We Want. Haug translates पूर्वपटलम् occurring in the text of this ancient Brahmana of the ‘Rig-veda by “the first part of the Mantra Collection.”

Was Panini acquainted with the art of writing? This is a question Which, I am afraid, I cannot adequately answer during the short time I have at my disposal, and I Will therefore content myself with only a few remarks on the subject. Any one who has carefully studied the Ashtadhyayi of Panini Will bear me out when I say that the peculiar arrangement and the mutual dependence of the Sutras in that Wonderful repository of the Sanskrit language afford overwhelming evidence in favour of Panini’s acquaintance with the art of Writing. Though the Ashtadhyayi contains nearly four thousand Sutras 3) or aphorisms, I ‘believe that it is not possible to say which of them Panini made first. The fact is that there are hardly any Sutras which stand by themselves and are independent of the rest of the Work. Without the help of some artificial aid like that of writing a systematic treatise of this description could never have been composed: for, according to Gautama, the author of the Nyaya-sutra, the characteristic of the human mind is that it cannot concentrate its attention on more than one thing at a time 4), and We may rest assured that even the greatest grammarian of India had of necessity to abide by this fundamental law of our mental constitution, and to employ Writing for the accomplishment of the difficult task he had undertaken. I cannot imagine how without the help of Writing he could have possibly collected the materials for his great Work, particularly as it is well-known that he quotes a

Vide Ancient Ssanskrit Literature p.524.

2) Aitareya Brahmana Panchikaa I.21. The word पुस्तक meaning a book occurs in the following sutra of LINGAANUSHASANA the authorship of which is traditionally ascribed to Panini :

कपटकानीकसर्कमोदकचषकमस्तक्पुस्तकडाकनिष्क etc. LINGAANU PUMLINGA-SUTRA 29

3) त्रीणि सूत्र सहस्राणि तथा नवशतानिच । षण्वतिसूत्राणि पाणिनि कृतवान् स्वयम् ॥

This shloka is quoted by Dr. Bohtlingk in the second volume (p. XIX) of his Edition of Panini.

4) युगपज्ज्ञानानुत्पत्तिर्मनसो लिङ्गम् । NYAAY DARSHANA I.1.16.

large number of ancient grammarians and notices in detail the lingual usages peculiar to different parts of India. I am fully persuaded that the Ashtaadhyayi contains the most distinct and prominent references to Writing: in fact Panini himself tells us that an “Adhikaara,” or heading rule is denoted in his grammar by the accent Svarita 1), and this I think proves conclusively that he employed writing in some form for the technical structure of his Work. We learn from the sixth Chapter of the Ashtadhyayi that at Panini’s time people used to mark the figures for eight and five on the ears of their cattle 2): - a practice which shows clearly that Writing was employed for ordinary purposes of life. The fact that Panini makes allusion to coins 3) for instance निष्क and रूप्य any with which latter, perhaps, the modern Word Rupee” is connected, and that he actually mentions the two Words लिपि and लिबि 4) both meaning “Writing 5)” affords a palpable proof of his acquaintance With the art of Writing without Which, as I have previously said, he could have never produced his great grammar.

I might add more evidence in support of the theory I have been advocating, if I were not afraid of taxing your patience and trespassing on your time. Let me merely add that I feel it a great honour and privilege to have been permitted to address so distinguished an assembly of orientalisists in a country once intimately connected by trading operations with the part of India in which I was born; and I cannot conclude Without thanking you with all my heart for the kindness and courtesy with which you have listened to my imperfect arguments.

1)स्वरितेनाधिकारः । Panini. I.1.11

2) कर्पोलक्षपास्याविष्टपच्चमणिभिन्नस्त्रुवस्वस्तिकस्य Panini VI-3-115. कर्पो वर्षालत्तज्ञात् । VI-2-112.

3) शतसहस्रान्ताच्च निष्कात् PAN. V.2-119. रूपादाहतप्रशंसयोः V.2-120.

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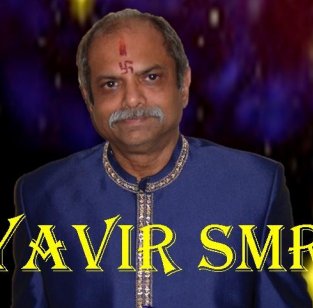
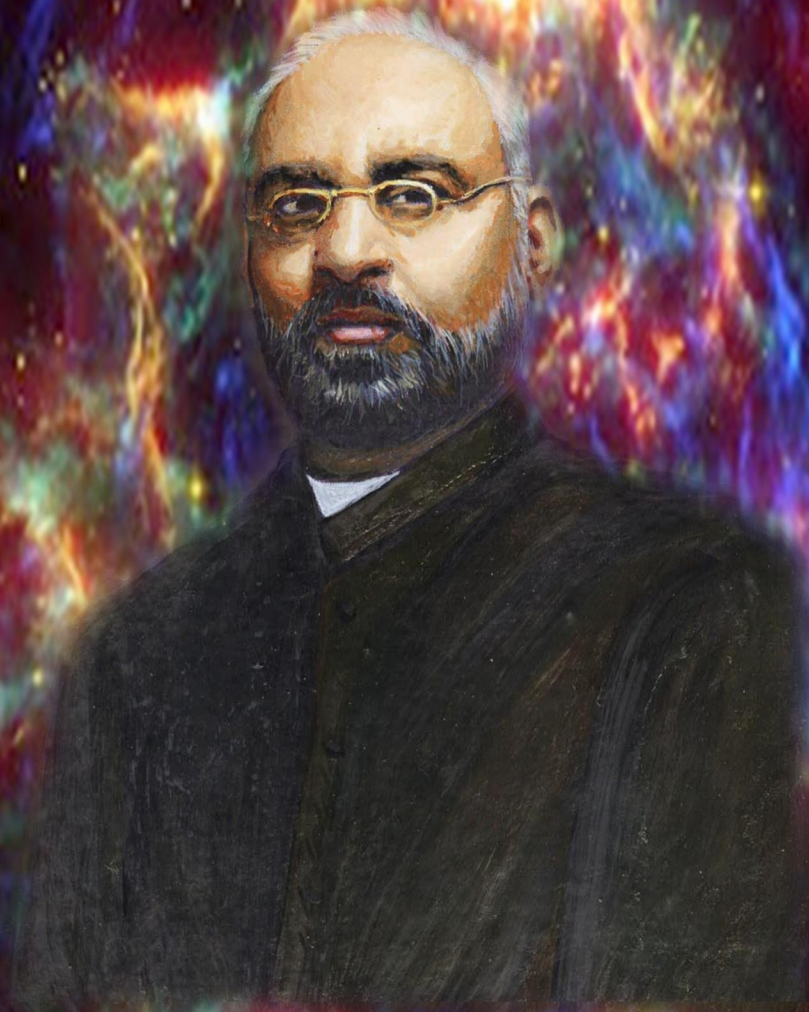
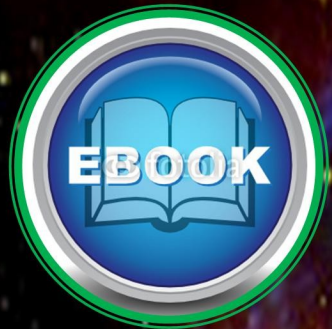


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